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Chapter One

JUSUF AL-HAFIZ

Philip d' Aubigny rode a few yards ahead of his two men servants. The sun was beginning to set, and the three horses and their riders threw long, dark shadows across the reddish earth. The air was hot and still, and the dust drifted away sluggishly, leaving behind a long trail to mark the way they had come.

Philip was hot. He was damp and sticky with sweat, his lips and throat were dry, and his face and hands, as well as his clothes, were powdered thickly with the reddish colour of the dust that never left them. But the discomfort did not cause him much concern. He had been born in Outremer, and was accustomed to the great heat of the summer, though he still disliked it intensely. Instead, he was

thinking of the pleasant week he had just spent at the castle of Montgizard, with his cousins, the Grandmesnils.

Sir Fulk, his uncle, had been as kind and amusing as usual; his cousin, Joscelin, had dazzled them all with his new clothes, for he fancied himself as one of the most fashionable young knights, and not even the most blistering of criticisms from Sir Fulk prevented Joscelin from trying some new design of shoe or cloak. They had ridden out with their hawks, hunted in the hills around Montgizard, and practised with sword and horse in the great courtyard of the castle.

And in the evening, up on the high dais in the hall, Sir Fulk had aired his pessimistic views about the likelihood of war again with the Infidels, and the dangerous position of the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem. The new leader of the Infidels, the Emir Saladin, so Philip gathered, was preparing for war. If his uncle was right, Philip thought, he might not have very long to wait now before he took part in his first real battle.

The road dropped abruptly into a narrow valley. Philip twitched his reins, and brought his horse to a walking pace. The road had been like this all day, a switchback winding through a tangle of bare, sun-baked hills and rocky valleys. Ahead, at a distance of several miles, he could pick out the odd, dome-shaped pinnacle of rock that looked down to his father's castle of Blanche Garde. They would be home in less than two hours, and in good time for the evening meal. It would be pleasant to bathe and change his clothes,

Philip decided, as he wriggled himself into a more comfortable position in his high saddle.

'Two horsemen ahead, my lord,' Llewellyn said from behind.

'Where? Oh, I can see them.'

Two black specks disappeared in a turn of the road about a mile ahead. They must be moving slowly, Philip thought. He would catch up with them in a short time.

'Venetian traders, I expect,' he said idly.

'Or robbers,' Llewellyn said. 'I heard there were some on this part of the road.'

'Yes, I remember now,' Philip said. 'Better keep closed up. Michael, see to your bow.'

Michael, the Syrian archer, nodded, and his white teeth showed in a smile against the swarthy brown of his face. There was no need to give any warning or advice to Llewellyn, Philip thought, as he glanced at his servant. For Llewellyn was a veteran soldier, tough, reliable, and imperturbable; his equipment immaculate and shining. Like his master, he had been born in Outremer, a mixture of Welsh, Norman, and Saxon blood. His face was burnt to a deep brown, nearly as dark as Michael's, and a sword cut had left a long, whitish-grey scar down his left cheek, reaching to the corner of his mouth, and giving him a queer, lop-sided kind of smile.

For Philip he had a great affection, and he treated his young master with an odd mixture of respect and reproof. One moment he would address him politely as 'my lord', and the next minute, with almost the same breath, roar at

him in the tones of a sergeant major rebuking a raw recruit; for he had taught Philip to handle a horse and sword, and accompanied him on all his journeys.

Philip could not see the two travellers ahead now. He felt the hilt of his sword. The long blade slid easily in the well greased leather of the scabbard. He was in plain riding clothes, without armour of any kind, though Llewellyn and Michael wore helmets and thick leather coats. He supposed he should be making a careful plan to deal with the robbers, if robbers they were, in front. That was what his father would have done, of course, and Philip sighed. He would never reach Sir Hugo's standard, he thought regretfully; and then he grinned at the memory of the last withering rebuke he had received from his father. 'Excitable, impulsive, scatter-brained young squire' had been part of the reproof that had descended upon his head. Well, he would try to be more careful this time. But he had a suspicion that at the first sign of danger he would charge off like an arrow from Michael's bow, and heaven alone knew what trap he would run into.

The track narrowed at this point, and then swung sharply to the right, winding, as Philip knew, like a snake for the next half mile through a tumbled mass of rocks that rose to a considerable height on either side. There could not be a better spot for an ambush by robbers on the whole road.

Philip heard the faint 'whirr' as Llewellyn drew his sword. The little party rode on slowly, their eyes flickering warily from right to left.

'Listen!' Philip cried. He pulled his horse to a sudden halt, and they all cocked their heads, listening.

The faint cry that Philip had heard was repeated. Then it was followed by a louder scream; that of a man in agony or overwhelming fear. It had hardly died away before Philip acted. He ripped out his sword and urged his horse forward with a vigorous kick from his sharply pointed spurs.

'Wait, my lord!' Llewellyn bellowed. 'It may be a trap!'

But he was too late. Philip was already out of sight around the bend. Llewellyn cursed fluently, and added a few phrases about the stupidity of foolhardy young squires. But he, too, wasted no time. With a curt order over his shoulder to Michael, he dashed after Philip.

Philip was enjoying himself. The sudden change of pace after the leisurely ride had filled him with a feeling of exhilaration. The wind of his charge fanned his cheeks as he bent low in the saddle, one hand on the reins, and the other swinging his sword gently, feeling the weight and balance of the long blade.

Then the track straightened, and he was in the midst of the ambush before he had time to pick out more than a fleeting impression of what was happening.

Two horses were rearing immediately ahead. One was riderless, with a limp figure on the ground by its side. Another man was swinging a sword from the saddle of the second horse, while two white-robed men were hacking at him from both sides with long, curved knives.

Philip had seen similar incidents before. One of the

robbers was trying to work his way behind, where he could hamstring the horse. Once the rider was down, his throat would be cut, and his baggage rifled.

The other robber heard the drumming of hooves, and leapt round. He saw Philip racing towards him, a long, gleaming blade swinging up in the air. He tried to jump to one side, clear of the sweep of the sword. He was a repulsive figure, filthy, pockmarked, his robes stained with dust and dirt, and his head swathed in a grimy turban.

Philip took the turban as his target. His horse was galloping at full speed now, and it was no easy task to hit such a small, moving object as a man's head. It demanded superb control of the horse and perfect timing of the blow.

But Philip had not practised for many weary hours in the courtyard at Blanche Garde for nothing. He let his well-trained horse have its head. His arm came up and back in a leisurely sweep of arm and wrist, while he kept his eyes rigidly fixed on the top of the turban. Then he brought the sword down with the instinctive sense of timing that not even years of tuition can teach. The robber flung up his arm helplessly, his face a mask of fear and snarling fury. But there was nothing he could do to ward off this thunderbolt of sudden death that had swept upon him. He went down with a strangled scream as Philip's sword caught him full across his turban, and split his skull with a sound like that of a hammer smashing down on a length of thin planking.

Philip tugged hard on his reins. His horse reared up on

its forelegs, swinging round under the steady guidance of the bridle. The scene had changed in those few seconds since Philip had burst into view. The second rider was falling back from his saddle as his horse went down under the knife of the second robber.

The thief glanced round, saw Philip on top of him, and raced for the shelter of the rocks where no horse could follow. He was half-way to safety when a deep *twang* came from behind Philip. The feathered shaft of an arrow appeared as if by magic in the fellow's back. He flung up his arms, yelled like a fiend in torment, and fell forward on his face, suddenly transformed from a swiftly moving man into an untidy bundle of dirty white robes that lay across the track.

'Good shot, Michael!' Philip shouted, and jumped down from his horse. He sheathed his sword, and bent over the rider who had first gone down.

A second's glance was enough. Philip had seen dead men before in his short life. He shrugged his shoulders, and went across to the second man.

'Still alive,' Philip muttered, as he turned over the limp figure.

Then he stiffened, and ran his eyes over the man with sudden interest. This was no Christian or Venetian merchant. And equally certain, he was no Syrian native, or even one of the numerous half-breeds who had grown up in Outremer from the mingling of Western and Syrian blood.

This was a Seljuk Turk, and a nobleman, too, to judge by the richness of his clothes; a leader of the people against

whom the Crusaders had fought for over a century.

'Llewellyn!' Philip said sharply.

There was no reply. Philip looked up impatiently. Llewellyn and Michael were bending over the two dead robbers, methodically running their hands through the men's clothes in search of money or jewellery.

'Leave them alone, Llewellyn,' Philip said curtly. 'And bring me a wineskin—no, a waterskin—from my horse. This fellow's still alive.'

Reluctantly Llewellyn stood up, and went towards Philip's horse, while his master dragged the unconscious man to the side of the track, and pillowed his head against a convenient rock.

Philip was thinking that it might be wiser to give him water. Not all the Infidels obeyed the strict rule of their religion about drinking no wine, but this was a nobleman.

As he waited for Llewellyn, Philip wiped away a trickle of blood from the Turk's forehead. He was wondering what had brought the man so close to the coast. A few years ago there would have been nothing unusual in such a visit. Christians and Turks moved freely in time of truce through each other's territories, and many Seljuks had stayed at Blanche Garde as guests of Sir Hugo. But since Saladin had begun his career of conquest in Egypt, and had welded the Turks into one formidable nation, few Infidels had been seen inland, not even to the east of Jerusalem where the vague and undefined frontiers of Outremer merged into the great belt of the desert.

Llewellyn handed him a waterskin, and Philip splashed water over the Turk's face, and then tried to force some between his lips. His rough and ready doctoring seemed to be effective, for the man's eyelids flickered, and then opened.

'You are quite safe,' Philip said hastily in his fluent Arabic. 'We are friends. Better drink this. You have had a nasty blow on the head.'

The Turk nodded. With one hand on Philip's shoulder, he pulled himself up to a sitting position, and then gulped down the water. Philip watched him with interest, noting the high brow under the silk turban, the thin arched nose above the neatly trimmed and pointed beard, and the long slender fingers that held the waterskin.

The Turk sighed, and looked up again. Some colour had returned to his dark cheeks, and he smiled.

'I will repay you for that drink one day, if Allah wills,' he said. His brown eyes inspected the scene on the track, the two bodies of the thieves, and the still figure of his servant. 'I owe you my life, too, sir Frank,' he said. 'I am Jusuf Al-Hafiz, and my father is the Emir Usamah Ibn-Menquidh, a friend of the great Emir Saladin.'

Philip put out his hand impulsively, as was his habit. He liked the look of the Turk.

'Oh, that's nothing, Sir Jusuf,' he exclaimed in his hurried and jerky way of speaking, as if he were afraid that he might not have time to finish a sentence. 'I am Philip d'Aubigny. My father is Sir Hugo d'Aubigny of Blanche

Garde, a Baron of the High Court of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. Are you feeling better now?'

Jusuf stood up, swaying slightly, with one hand to his forehead.

'You'd better ride to Blanche Garde with us,' Philip said. 'It's only a few miles from here, and my father will gladly entertain you until you are well enough to travel again.'

Despite his aching head, the Turk bowed gracefully. 'I shall be honoured, Sir Philip,' he said, his full red lips parting in a friendly smile.

'Oh, I'm not a knight yet!' Philip exclaimed. 'Only a squire. I expect father will ask the King to knight me in about two or three years' time. When I am twenty.'

He chatted away busily as they rode towards Blanche Garde. Jusuf Al-Hafiz said little. But he listened attentively, watching Philip's expressive face, smiling and nodding gravely when necessary, his long brown fingers stroking his beard, or flicking away the dust that settled on his clothes, with all the dainty neatness of some sleek cat.

Although he did not know it, Philip was being sized up by a shrewd and experienced observer. Perhaps if he had known, he would not have behaved otherwise, for Philip had no illusions about his appearance. 'No beauty' was Joscelin's description; but there were few who could cut much of a figure compared to that elegant young knight.

What the Turk saw was a thickset young man, wide of shoulder, and unusually long in the arm, with a determined and obstinate chin, a pair of very steady grey eyes, and a big

curving nose that dominated his face. The astute and cultured Turkish nobleman felt that this young squire might well develop into a leader of men one day.

'Blanche Garde!' Philip cried.

A wide valley lay below them, a strip of green running through the monotonous brown of the surrounding hills. A broad stream meandered lazily down the length of the valley with the scattered houses of the little township on either side, whitewashed buildings with flat roofs, and in the centre the mosque-like church.

Through the town went the main highway from the coast to Jerusalem. Philip's grandfather had built his castle here to protect this favourite route of pilgrims and merchants moving inland from the busy port of Ascalon, and had sited the fortress with care. On one side the high curtain walls rose sheer from the stream, and a natural fall of the rocky ground covered another flank which would have given any attacking force a difficult approach, for the stream widened there and sprawled out over a wide marsh.

The walls of Blanche Garde had been white once, but a hundred years had toned them now to a light grey. Indeed, from the direction in which Philip and Jusuf were approaching, straight into the setting sun, the castle was a mass of sharp black lines silhouetted against the glare.

Sentries sprang to attention as Philip led Jusuf through the huge gatehouse and across the wide inner ward to the foot of the old keep, which was now the main residential

part of the castle. Syrian servants ran out to hold the horses, and to unload the baggage.

The great hall was cool and shady after the glare and heat of the sun. More servants were laying the tables for the evening meal, and Philip told the steward to lay an additional place on the high table for Jusuf.

'We're late, Sir Jusuf,' Philip said anxiously. 'Father is very particular about punctuality at meals. Do you mind changing quickly?'

Jusuf smiled as he saw the expression on Philip's worried face, and the smile almost developed into a grin, if such a dignified man could have given way to such a weakness.

'Of course not, Philip,' he said. 'If you will show me to my room . . .'

Philip swept him across the hall, up a spiral staircase, and shouting to Llewellyn, bustled his guest into a room in the tower.

Once in his own room, Philip pulled off his dusty clothes, and hurled them carelessly on chair or bed, while Llewellyn poured hot water into a metal bath.

'How much did you find on the robbers?' Philip asked as he splashed luxuriously in the warm water.

Llewellyn grunted with disgust. 'Two bezants only, my lord. And Michael has those now.'

'Why? What about your share?'

'We diced for them, my lord.' Llewellyn's scarred cheek lifted in a grimace of annoyance. 'And Michael won. He always does.'

Philip grinned, and dripped water all over the floor as he clambered out of the bath. He dried himself hurriedly on the rough towel, snatched at the long stockings that Llewellyn gave him, ducked his head into the silk cotte, or loose coat that fell to his ankles, and then put his arms into a wide sur-coat with huge sleeves. Llewellyn buckled a narrow belt around his waist, while Philip dabbed at his hair with a comb, trying to reduce his dark and unruly hair to some reasonable state of tidiness, otherwise Sir Hugo would have something to say about scruffy young squires.

Jusuf was ready, bathed and changed, his beard freshly combed, his clothes well fitting and immaculate, as if he had spent several hours over his toilet.

'Father will be in the solar,' Philip said, and darted down the narrow stairs.

The solar was the private apartment of the lord of the castle, and at Blanche Garde was built immediately behind the hall, with a door leading on to the dais and the high table. There was little of the bleak discomfort of the West about Sir Hugo d'Aubigny's solar, for he had adopted the luxurious and more highly civilized habits of the East.

The large room was bright with silken hangings, the floors covered with rugs, and the chairs filled with coloured cushions. A painted ceiling gave the whole apartment a feeling of coolness and space, and as Blanche Garde was no longer in the front line of the fortresses of Outremer, the windows were wider than usual, and let in some of the evening sun and the cool breeze that sprang up at night.

As Philip ushered his guest into the room, the group of men by the big, empty fireplace broke off their conversation, and turned their heads towards the door. There were the usual guests and passing knights and barons of Outremer, and among them two knights of the Military Order of the Hospitallers, Sir Miles de Plancy, and Sir Amaury de Bethsan, both in their black cloaks with the white crosses on the shoulder.

Philip saw them with dismay. Like the other great Crusading Order of the Templars, the Hospitallers were fighting monks, recruited for a life of warfare against the Infidel. They had no patience with the friendly attitude of many Barons of Outremer for the Turks; their feelings were those of fanatical hatred. Neither de Plancy nor de Bethsan, as Philip knew too well, would be pleased to find themselves sitting down to dinner with a Seljuk Turk.

Jusuf advanced slowly across the room behind Philip. He may have been conscious of the disdainful attitude of some of the men there, but he showed no sign of it as he bowed gracefully to the tall silent man standing in front of the fireplace.

Philip had a great admiration and affection for his father, perhaps because Sir Hugo possessed all those qualities which he was so anxious to acquire himself. The Lord of Blanche Garde was a fine and imposing figure in his rich Eastern robes and sandals, his face burnt a dark brown by a lifetime in Outremer. But for his name, there was little to show that he was a pure-blooded Norman nobleman, and

he seemed to have acquired some of the impassiveness of the East in his manners too, as he greeted Jusuf in perfect Arabic, and with a quiet courtesy.

Philip plunged into a hurried and excitable account of what had happened on the road from Montgizard. Sir Hugo listened gravely. He was a man of few words, though he could be forceful enough when he wished.

'You have done well, Philip,' he said. 'But you rushed in as recklessly as usual, it seems. Ah, the trumpets are sounding for dinner. Sir Jusuf?' He waved a hand towards the door, and swept into the hall.

The Hospitallers drew their long cloaks aside as Jusuf Al-Hafiz followed Sir Hugo, and their brick-red faces flushed with anger. But the Turk was their fellow guest, and they swallowed their feelings with some difficulty. Philip grinned, and fell in at the end of the small procession.

Sir Hugo dined in considerable state in his castle, with a silken canopy above his head, and his table covered with silver and glassware, the finest that the craftsmen of the East could produce. Each course of the elaborate meal was preceded by a trumpet call and a procession up the floor of the hall from the kitchen at the far end.

Philip, as a squire, listened to the conversation in silence. The guests would obviously have liked to discuss the changing military position, for the news from the frontiers was depressing. But they could hardly do so with Jusuf present. Fortunately both Christian and Turk had

much in common, and they all talked readily enough about hunting, falconry, horses, and weapons, while Jusuf spoke of his experiences in Egypt. He pleaded an aching head towards the end of the meal, and begged to be excused. A servant led him to his room, and silence fell on the high table. It was broken by Miles de Plancy. He was a corpulent and red-faced man, with an expression of obstinate stupidity, and he leant forward excitedly towards his host.

'What's that fellow doing so close to the coast, Sir Hugo?' he barked angrily. 'Up to no good, you know, up to no good!'

Amaury de Bethsan wagged his grizzled head in agreement. Sir Hugo was peeling fruit with great care, and did not even look up.

'I don't suppose he is,' he said placidly.

'But what's he doing here?' repeated Sir Miles wrathfully.

Sir Hugo laid down his knife, and wiped his fingers fastidiously on a napkin that Llewellyn held out for him.

'Spying, very probably,' he said calmly.

The Hospitallers gobbled like turkeys, their faces purple with irritation. Philip stared at his father in amazement.

'Spying?' he exclaimed. 'But why, father? We've had Turks staying at Blanche Garde before this.'

'Of course, Philip. But not for some time. They've been too busy lately, fighting with Saladin to unite Islam. Now they are ready.'

'Of course they are!' snapped Sir Miles. 'And we sit

about waiting for them!' He drained a glass of wine and banged the stem down on the table with almost enough force to break the slender glass.

Sir Hugo watched the fate of his precious Damascus glass with some anxiety before resuming his meal. He reached for a dish of figs and dates, and went on eating quietly while the argument raged around him. Philip had a shrewd suspicion that his father had his own very definite opinions on the subject, but could not be bothered to argue with his guests. Sir Hugo, he knew, did not suffer fools gladly.

'What would Jusuf be looking for, sir?' Philip asked. 'I mean, what sort of information does he want?' he added nervously, wondering if his father would treat him as a fool too.

But Sir Hugo seldom did that to Philip; he might tell his son how stupidly rash he was, or how talkative, or how much he had to learn, but he always answered his questions seriously.

'Oh, he might want to know something about the strength of the various castles, the number of their garrisons, the state of the roads; a hundred items useful to a good general like Saladin.'

The other guests, now that Jusuf's restraining presence had gone, were discussing the latest news. One of them was on his way to the coast from Jerusalem, and had a good deal to say about opinion in the capital.

'The news is bad,' he said gloomily.

'Bad!' snorted Sir Miles. 'It's time we fought the cursed

Infidels again. This truce has lasted long enough. We didn't come to Outremer to live at peace with the fellows.'

'But they will put a huge army in the field, Sir Miles,' ventured the other knight.

'Pooh!' Sir Miles waved away the Infidel hordes with a pudgy hand. 'Why worry about that? We shall beat the Infidels. We always have before!'

Sir Hugo looked at his guest with barely suppressed irritation.

'What are we going to beat them with, Miles?' he asked.

Sir Amaury turned in surprise, his blue eyes popping. 'What with? With our knights, of course, Sir Hugo.'

'How many have you in the garrison at Ascalon?' Sir Hugo asked.

'Oh, about twenty.'

'And at Ibelin?'

'Fifteen. Below strength, of course,' Sir Miles admitted.

'Exactly. And you will find the same story all over Outremer. What can we put in the field?' Sir Hugo demanded, pushing aside the bowl of fruit. 'A thousand knights? Certainly not more.'

The guests nodded gloomily. It was the old story, the continual weakness of Outremer, this frightening shortage of men. Recruits from the West came in a thin trickle, even to the two great Military Orders.

'You can't have it both ways,' Sir Hugo said. 'Either we garrison the castles, and have no army in the field, or else

we strip the castles for a campaign, and have no garrisons.'

The argument continued, while Philip nodded in his seat, for he was tired after his ride. He had heard this all before, too, and there seemed to be no solution. The heavily armoured knights were the main striking force of any army at that time, though, of course, infantry and archers were essential. But infantry was not the problem in Outremer; a large enough force could be raised fairly easily; the shortage of knights was the nightmare hanging over the Christians.

'What shall I do with Jusuf tomorrow, father?' Philip asked after dinner.

'Take him out hawking. I shall probably come with you.'

Philip nodded, though there must have been some doubt in his face, for his father smiled.

'Afraid of what he will see? I shouldn't worry. We have nothing to hide, and if we had, I expect Jusuf would soon find it out. He seems an intelligent fellow.'

The other guests had left when Sir Hugo and Philip rode out with Jusuf, hawks on their wrists, and falconers behind them. The main road was crowded with traffic, long trains of horses and mules moving in both directions, for there was a brisk and thriving trade now between East and West. There were the usual pilgrims, too, for this was the shortest route from the coast to the Holy City. Some of the richer pilgrims rode, but the majority were on foot. Philip admired these men of all nationalities and ages, trudging

steadily along under the hot sun, haversack on back, staff in hand, with their grey cloaks and round, felt hats. The hats were his chief interest, for he had learned to recognize the different badges worn by the pilgrims, which showed the different shrines they had visited.

One venerable old man stopped Philip. His long white hair flowed from under his hat, for pilgrims often took a vow not to shave or cut their hair until they had accomplished their pilgrimage.

'Can you tell me the nearest place I can spend the night, my lord?' he asked. 'My feet are badly swollen, and I can walk no farther today.'

'You can stay at my father's castle of Blanche Garde,' Philip said. 'Over the brow of the hill. The steward will give you some ointment for your feet, too.'

He ran his eyes over the old man's hat. This was no ordinary pilgrim, he thought, for the hat band was nearly covered with the little badges of the famous shrines he had visited. There was the image of the miraculous handkerchief with the face of Christ on it, which was given to those who had been to Rome; the more unusual emblems of the cockle-shell of Compostella, and the head of John the Baptist from Amiens, and several others. But there was one that was strange to Philip.

'What pilgrimage is that?' he asked, pointing. 'Is it the figure of some saint?'

'That is the shrine of St David, my lord.'

'St David?' Philip was puzzled. 'Where is that?'

'His shrine is in Wales, my lord. But you will not have heard of that country, I expect. It is a small land in the far corner of England.'

Philip leant forward eagerly. 'Wales!' he exclaimed excitedly. 'But I have heard of it! My grandfather came from there when he rode on the First Crusade. Do you know a castle called Llanstephan?'

The old pilgrim looked up at the eager face bending down from the Arab horse. He smiled, and his face broke into a network of fine wrinkles.

'I spent a night at Llanstephan on the way to St David's, my lord,' he said. 'It is the home of the d'Aubigny family.'

Philip was tremendously excited. He was on the point of pouring out a flood of questions when he heard a shout. He looked impatiently over his shoulder. Sir Hugo was waving to him from the distance.

'Oh, I must go!' Philip said. 'But I will speak with you tonight. Ask at Blanche Garde for Ivo the Steward. Say I sent you. I am Philip d'Aubigny.'

He turned his horse and galloped up the road to join his father and Jusuf.

'Father!' he cried. 'That pilgrim has been to Wales! He spent a night at Llanstephan. I asked him to wait for me at Blanche Garde. Think of it! He's actually been to Llanstephan, and I meet him here on this road!'

'Indeed,' Sir Hugo said indifferently. 'He must have come a long way. I will make him a present.'

Philip was not surprised or particularly downcast by his father's lack of interest. After all, why should Sir Hugo be at all curious about Wales or Llanstephan? He had never seen them, and he probably never would. His whole life had been spent in Outremer; he was the lord of a rich fief and a strong castle; his future was bound up with the East, not with the distant country where his father had once lived as a boy.

Sir Hugo beckoned to Philip and Jusuf, and they turned off the main road to follow a track that would lead them to the marshes. The falconers, with the hawks gripping fast to their wrists, trotted on ahead, while Sir Hugo paused at the crest of the hill.

'You can see Ascalon from here, Sir Jusuf,' he said. 'It is a fine view.'

The port was a faint blur in the distance, with the harder line of the coast to mark the boundary of Outremer. Tumbled hills and ravines, brown and bare, with hardly a tree to break the monotony of the savage landscape, marched steadily towards the coast in endless succession, shimmering in a blinding haze of heat.

'We can signal to Ascalon from the gatehouse of Blanche Garde,' Sir Hugo continued. 'And to Montgizard and Beth Gibelin as well. But that is nothing unusual, of course. Krak des Chevaliers, in Lebanon, can signal to Safita and Castel Rouge, just as the castles of Tiberias, Saphet, Subeiba and Toron are all within sight of one another.'

Jusuf's long fingers played with his beard, while for a

moment his brown eyes met and caught Sir Hugo's steady glance. The two men half smiled.

'Interesting,' Jusuf said. 'But then I believe the Lord Reynaud de Chatillon can signal by fires from his castle of Kerak to King David's tower at Jerusalem?'

'Oh yes,' Sir Hugo said. 'Very useful in an emergency, you see.'

'Very useful,' agreed Jusuf gravely.

He shook his reins, and fell in beside Sir Hugo as they cantered after the falconers. The two had understood each other well, thought Philip. But it was just as well to remind the Seljuks how skilfully the great chain of castles had been sited for the protection of the Kingdom.

Philip sent for the old pilgrim after they returned to Blanche Garde. The steward had reported the arrival of the old fellow, and said that he had been treated well, and his feet attended to.

Philip waved the pilgrim to a stool when Llewellyn brought him up to the circular room in the tower.

'What is your name?' Philip asked.

'Walter, my lord. I am sometimes called Walter of the Mill, or Walter of York.'

'York? Where is that?'

'In the north of England, my lord. It is an important city, and has a great cathedral.'

Philip handed the old man a slate. 'Draw a map of England for me, Walter,' he said. 'Mark in York, and then Llanstephan.'

Walter scratched a crude drawing of England on the slate, while Philip leant forward to begin his first lesson in the geography of his native country.

'And Wales?' he asked, when the old man had shown him the position of York and some of the more important cities of England. 'Tell me what the country is like. It is very different to this, isn't it?'

Walter's face crinkled with amusement. 'Yes, my lord, there is a great difference.' He paused to collect his thoughts. How could he give this pleasant young nobleman even the most fleeting and vague conception of England in a few words? He looked through the narrow slit-window let into the thick walls of the lofty tower.

There was a superb view from that height, across the valley of Blanche Garde, over the cluster of flat-topped houses, the dull green of the marsh, and then to the rolling succession of bare hills, brown and treeless, sweltering under the fierce sun that beat down from a steely blue sky.

Philip watched the old man's placid expression, the faded blue eyes, and the general air of contentment. Walter must have led a hard and dangerous life, tramping through Christendom, passing from one country to another, with no settled home, no family, and no ties. But his experiences seemed to have left nothing save this air of tranquillity.

Walter turned back from the window. 'England is a green country, my lord,' he said. 'Grey mists, soft rain, even in the summer. The trees are everywhere, heavy with leaf, and the valleys are deep and moist. Even the hillsides

themselves are green. I wish you could see an English wood as I have, my lord, on a summer's day, when the wild flowers are in bloom, and you can hear the bees at their work.'

Philip nodded. His imagination was filled with the vision of green forests that Walter had painted so vividly.

'But the winters?' he asked. 'Aren't they horribly cold? I don't know how you can live in such a climate.'

'Oh, they are not so unbearable, my lord,' Walter said. 'Have you ever seen a frost?'

Philip shook his head and shivered.

'Many times when I have been scorched by the sun on my travels,' Walter said, 'I have longed for a winter's morning in England, when your cheeks tingle with the bite of the air, and you can feel the frost crackle under your feet. And the frost makes patterns, my lord, on everything it touches; the leaves and the trees and all the plants are covered with it. I have seen many wonderful cities and buildings, but I tell you, my lord, that a single tiny pattern of frost is more beautiful than the loveliest stone carving in all Christendom.'

Philip sat motionless in his seat. He was afraid to say anything for fear the old man would stop.

'And there is the snow,' Walter went on. 'All is still, my lord, and white and spotless. It is as if the good Lord is showing us how clean we should keep the earth.'

'Yes, it must be very beautiful,' Philip muttered.

'Would you like to go to England?' Walter asked curiously.

Philip laughed. 'When you speak like that about England, Walter,' he said, 'I wish I could visit it. But my home is here. Now, tell me about Llanstephan. Is it a large castle?'

'No, quite small. Much smaller than this, my lord.' Walter waved a hand around the room. 'It is on the coast, above the mouth of a river. I remember hearing the low roar of the sea when I tried to sleep that night.'

'And the lord of the castle?' Philip asked eagerly. 'Did you speak to him, Walter?'

'That would be Sir Henry d'Aubigny. But it was many years ago, and I expect he is dead now, my lord.'

Philip was vaguely disappointed. He had hoped to hear more about his unknown cousins. The old man stood up to go.

'I must sleep well tonight,' he said. 'In two days I may see the Holy City itself and the Church of the Sepulchre.'

'What pilgrimage will you make after this one?' Philip asked.

Walter shrugged his bowed shoulders. 'Who knows, my lord? This is the greatest of all the pilgrimages. I may never return.'

'Return where? Have you a home, then?'

Walter shook his head. 'York, perhaps. But it is many years since I was there. I think I will return to York. This is the last pilgrimage I shall make.'

He bowed with his simple dignity to Philip and left the room.